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AGNOSTICISM.

A POSTHUMOUS ESSAY.*

AS the Greek word *Gnostikos* means *capable of knowledge*, we may conclude that an *Agnostikos* is, according to the name he himself assumes, a man *incapable of knowledge*. And, because he is incapable of knowledge, he concludes that no knowledge is obtainable. This may be admirable logic, but it is a sorry foundation for a philosophy of enormous pretensions.

It is only because the higher—or, perhaps, it would be more correct to say, the deeper—philosophy is so little studied in England that so shallow a thing as Agnosticism has been so extensively accepted among us. The chief champion of Agnosticism has been

* The life of William Maccall was uneventful. He was born at Largs (Scotland), and was educated for the ministry. For many years he was prominent in the Unitarian pulpit, and, finding this too narrow, accepted the Rationalist press and platform as opportunities for propaganda. His literary friendships were notable—Professor Wilson, J. S. Mill, and Carlyle among the illustrious list. He commenced his autobiography in the pages of *The Agnostic Journal*, but only reached his college days; he died, disappointed to the last, but with rugged independence unimpaired. His principal works were: *The Elements of Individualism*; *National Missions*; *Foreign Biographies* (two volumes); *Bygone Days* (three volumes from the German); *The Man of Birth and the Woman of the People* (three volumes from the Swedish); *Agents of Civilisation*, etc. In a brilliant volume on *The Newest Materialism* he assailed Spencer memorably. *Moods and Memories* was published shortly before his death, four or five years ago, and preserved some of his best poetry. He consistently refused a Civil Service pension Mr. Gladstone was influenced to offer—no man despised money more than he, even in gaunt adversity. The essay here published for the first time was written shortly before his death and presented to Mr. Charles A. Watts, to whom we are indebted for the manuscript. The reader will find further information on William Maccall in an attractive article by Amos Waters, which has appeared in No. 313 of *The Open Court*.

proclaimed by his enthusiastic admirers the greatest of all philosophers in language—ludicrous from its exaggeration, and pitiable from its imbecility. Verily, the god and the adorers of the god are worthy of each other. This profound thinker made the astounding discovery that the universe is unknowable, is inscrutable. With the recognition of the sublime discovery the whole range of mental speculation is to be revolutionised; all the sciences are to receive new life and grand transformation; politically, socially, morally, religiously, the whole world is to undergo the divinest metamorphosis. But suppose that there has really been no discovery; suppose that from the remotest times men have viewed the seen as the image of the unseen, earth as the vestibule of the skies; suppose that every religion has mystery as foundation and as essence; suppose that every religion claiming to be revealed declares that the revelation simply deepens the mystery—must not Agnosticism, in reference to its leading principle, be spurned as an egregious quackery?

Agnosticism confounds things that have no relation to each other. While vindicating science, it makes a show of patronising religion and of reconciling religion with science. With the Unknown and the Unknowable science has nothing whatever to do. The Unknown and the Unknowable are, for science, the non-existent. As its name implies, science deals with the Known and the Knowable. When it prates of the Unknown and the Unknowable, it uses a meaningless jargon. On the other hand, it is in the Unknown and the Unknowable that religion lives, moves, and has its being. Religion is impelled towards mysticism, just as science is impelled towards rationalism. It is a blunder as monstrous to introduce mysticism into science as to introduce rationalism into religion. A mystical science is a contradiction in terms. A rational religion is a contradiction in terms. Hence Protestant churches, to the extent that they are rationalistic, are not religious. It is in phantasy and emotion that religion has its life, and it is in symbol and rite that it has its expression. In Protestantism phantasy and emotion have slender sway, and symbol and rite are subordinated to dogma. The religious penury of Protestantism is as flagrant as its foe, Ro-

manism, represents it. Dogma had no place in the ancient religions; has none in the deepest Oriental religions; and if that phantom called the Religion of the Future ever takes solid shape, it is by the rejection of dogma that it must begin, and by the adoration of mysticism as the sole source of spiritual sympathy and vitality. The persons called Liberals prophesy the reign of reason, in which God is to be tolerated if content with the fragments that fall from the altar of the goddess Reason. But why should we expect them to be more reasonable than the universe itself, in which nothing is discernible but the action of instinctive force? It is to this instinctive force, the supreme creative energy, that the mystical element in the individual must draw near. In opposition to Rome, Protestantism vindicated the right of private judgment, as if religion were wholly the affair of the cold and barren understanding. Private judgment very soon finds that it can dispense with religion altogether. But, if the individual is convinced that the whole past has significance, and the whole seen and unseen universe has suggestiveness entirely in reference to the instinctive and the mysterious in himself, he plunges further and further into the ecstatic abyss of Intuition. The Panontist, the believer in Instinct as the greater and in Reason as the lesser, is the harbinger of an enfranchisement which may be yet far off, but which is sure at last to arrive.

It is as a genteeler, and at the same time more cowardly, kind of Atheism that Agnosticism is attractive to many silly and superficial mortals. A frank, fanatical Atheist justly demands from us the esteem due to earnestness. But the man who, purely as a dilettante, debates the question of God's existence, must receive from us the dilettante's reward.

Often it is said that the present age is a sceptical age. But no age is sceptical, though one age may be more influenced than another by the sceptical spirit. Men in the mass are always believers, and are the more superstitious the more there is of apparent incredulity. *Skepsis* means deliberation and the discussion which is the result of deliberation. Intellectually it is an instrument, morally it is a mood; but it can never be a system. It does not of necessity imply doubt, and it is never identical with negation. A true sciep-

tic is a true thinker ; and it is ridiculous to dignify rabid negationism with the name of scepticism.

In human communities all real growth is moral growth ; all real decay is moral decay. And there is peril to every community in which intellectual progress is not simply the minister of moral development, the food of the moral life. Now, a chief characteristic of our own age is superficial intellectual excitement, which allies itself with other causes in producing moral languor and debility. The salvation, the greatness of nations must be sought in the combined action of holiness and heroism ; and if heroism perishes, holiness must perish too. What depth of meaning there is in the grand Greek saying, that war is the father of all things ! How the point and pith of that saying mock the idolatry of comfort, which is the only religion of the present generation ! Religion of a higher, a diviner kind has wholly lost its empire, and has dwindled into a drawing-room entertainment, diversified by a subscription to a local charity. The Church of England has immense social power, but not one feeblest throb of spiritual vitality ; and the dissenting sects waste their small remaining stock of strength on crotchets and cants. Romanism alone has the feeling and the idea of what religion should be, though, instead of marching valiantly and working fruitfully as in the Middle Ages it marched and worked, it cravenly seeks refuge in obscurantism as a stronghold. The significance of conflict in the economy of the universe men must again see if again they are themselves to be holy and heroic.

A man of eminent genius discoursed eloquently on hero worship, and spent much of his time in denouncing shams. But no one was ever made more heroic by his eloquence, more honest by his denunciations. The splendid pictorial phrases of the illustrious writer were fervently admired and speedily forgotten. In truth, if we adore heroes, the less disposition have we to be ourselves heroic, for we are led to contrast their bravery and achievements with our own feebleness. In echoing also him who anathematises shams, what shams we ourselves inevitably become ! No, heroism must be inspiration, discipline, action ; and, to vanquish semblances, we must ourselves be realities.

But when we behold all around us moral lassitude, moral *asthenia*, moral *Abspannung*, how are we to heal our own moral atony? How are we to grow resolute and bold in the midst of such tragical moral declension? Even our very despairs, however, may be miraculous springs of vigor and courage, for they may lead us to count our own life as nothing, and enable us, in sublime self-annihilation, to do marvellous deeds. But the force of will must be equal to the loftiness of the ideal, and the fire of the enthusiasm, otherwise meagre enough, must be the result. And meagre enough it may be after even our most strenuous efforts, for the time of the world's redemption may not yet be come.

We are not, however, sent by the supernal powers to be heroes, saints, martyrs, prophets, but men. Only when we are hindered, only because we are obstructed, in our free, spontaneous career are we compelled to be, and are we justified in being, redeemers of our race. Novalis, a profound thinker, but often more subtle than profound, has said that we are on a mission—are called to the culture of the earth. But it is as absurd to talk of natural duties as of natural rights, about which Socialists make such a fuss. Both natural duties and natural rights are figments. All that is required of man is to be man: in order to be man, he must be indomitably valiant; and thus the English *manliness* corresponds to the Latin *virtus* and the Greek *andreia*. From courage idealised flow all human goodness and all human greatness. Civilisation has worth, and brings blessing just so far as it idealises courage. This the Greeks at their noblest time and the Romans in their best days clearly saw. And the doctrine had a sublime vindication both in the principles and the practices of the Stoics. Idealised manliness is idealised order and idealised freedom. For the individual who is armed with true manliness seeks freedom only as the condition or preliminary of order.

When does the mystery of the Invisible begin to overwhelm his soul? From the first moment of his existence. The child brings into the world the plenitude of the inner infinite, to which all knowledge and all feeling can never be more than correspondences. It is only by slow degrees that the child can seize the finite: for a

long time external things are to the inner infinite nothing but vagueness. The fundamental fallacy misleading and vitiating all philosophical speculation is the belief that sense is the primary apocalypse to poor mortals. But sense merely seizes something analogous to, or symbolical of, what already exists in the heart—existed there, indeed, even when the child was in the mother's womb. Hence education ought exclusively to be the cultivation of the instinctive element, which, however, is always disregarded, because it is invariably confounded with brutal appetite.

But if the inner infinite, disclosing and unfolding itself through the instinctive element, is more than the chief part of the individual, is verily the individual himself, must not the animating principle of universal nature be recognised as wholly an instinctive energy? Without doubt. But what is lost by the admission? Yea, in sooth, is not much gained? When God is depicted as an Omniscient Being, as an Omnipotent Creator, as Supreme Reason, as a Loving Father, we are driven to ask why there are so many miseries and monstrosities, why the history of the world is nothing but a chronicle of cruelty and crime. It is the Ideologists, the scribblers of Theodicæas, who are the real Atheists, not the Panontists—not they who frankly and gladly avow that there is a God, but deny that there is any proof of omniscience, of omnipotence, of reason, of love, in the sense in which these words are by theologians accepted.

You say that to speak thus is blasphemy; but the charge of blasphemy is so often and so easily brought that small heed must be given to it. It is gross presumption in man to attempt the vindication of God's ways: it is wiser and better to ascertain what those ways are, and to walk in them so far as our strength permits. Compared with the inner infinite and the God there and the outward infinite and the God there, how worthless are human traditions! Yet what but human traditions are all theologies? They are, therefore, interesting no further than they harmonise with our spiritual aspirations and needs. What is good in them we appropriate and assimilate; what we deem bad in them we reject, without, however, blaming our neighbor for taking as spiritual nutriment that which we condemn.

In a country where, according to the French jest, there are a hundred religions and only one sauce, what a wearisome and profitless task it would be to assail that which is intellectually absurd in those hundred religions ! If in ignorance, stupidity, bigotry they impede our march to perfection, we thrust them aside without ceremony : that is all. Woe to him who is dominated by the proselytising temper ! His craze irritates the whole host of other crazes, and intensifies the contagion and the curse of religious lunacy. A fresh convert is an additional lunatic. When, in defiance of historical testimony, multitudes can be fascinated by the crass notion that the English are descended from the ten tribes of Israel, what hope can there be of the emancipation of the whole people from theological thralldom ?

Life creates life, and a divine life is the only infallible evangel : the heroic achievements of the divine life are the only fecund ideas. Suppose that the entire past were to be effaced from human memory, we should still stand in the presence of the universe, and be ready for new and noble action ; and from our deeds would spring thoughts which themselves would be deeds. It is from this grander Gnosticism, not from a rickety and ranting Agnosticism, that earth must seek moral impulse and moral sustenance. Doubtless are widely spread in the world, and especially in the English world, the grossest delusions. It is not these, however, which discourage the earnest reformer, but the indifference, the apathy, the coarse materialism, the tyranny of fashion and custom, the insatiable selfishness, the unscrupulous avarice, the social hollowness, the conscious—and, still worse, the unconscious—hypocrisy.

Every earnest reformer in a country whose political might and commercial expansion contrast with its moral degradation, and, what is sadder far, its moral debility, labors and combats as a soldier in a forlorn hope. He is at last driven to feel that his silence may be more potent than his speech, and that he can best be a reformer by ceasing to take the 'reformer's attitude, and by being as natural as the bird in its song and flight and as the flower in its bloom.

It is the easiest, and yet the hardest, of all things to be perfectly natural ; and this is the earnest reformer's perplexity. What

he has chiefly to aim at is not to learn, but to unlearn ; and, when unlearning, he may wander into the region of eccentricity. The earnest reformer may become eccentric in the effort to shun eccentricity, and paradoxical in the endeavor to eschew paradox. To be a man, a natural man, he must be once more a child. We might almost say, with a divine teacher who was a son of the people, that he must be born again. After being born again, after living for the second time a childlike life, he can live anew a manlike life, but with more effulgence and plentitude than of old.

There is a cant in these days about solving problems. With solving problems the earnest reformer, in his regenerate existence, has nothing to do. In the universe there are no problems to be solved. But from the great deep of the immensities there are affluences evermore, and it is by bathing in these that the earnest reformer wins new life for himself and his brethren.

We are compelled to regard the earnest reformer as the most victorious refutation of the Agnostics and their pretentious and preposterous gospel. It was said of Malebranche that, while he pretended to see, in accordance with his system, all things in God, curiously enough he did not see that he himself was mad. And, as becometh sciolists, the Agnostics mistake *skēpsis* with an *eta* for *skēpsis* with an *epsilon*. There are many besides the Agnostics who make the like blunder. As a timid, trimming, twaddling, negationism, as a deification of the privative alpha, can Agnosticism honestly demand from us any serious consideration?

Over and over again in the world's history the only argument against sophistry has been moral revolt, though often this moral revolt has been limited to the solitary voice of the prophet. Even for the most fervent prophet, however, the most earnest moral reformer, battling with Agnosticism, can seldom be more than a *skiamachia*, a fighting in the shade, a fighting with shadows.

Positivism, as its very name implies, has positive principles. The originality, as well as the verity, of these has been questioned by Saisset and others. But they offer points of assault : we have something to assail, and we know what we are assailing. With the privative alpha of Agnosticism, however, how can we grapple?

When the tiny cherubim, with wings and head, but no body, were asked to take a seat, they replied that they had no wherewith. Now, it is the lack of a wherewith which makes Agnosticism invulnerable. We cannot smite its head, for it has none ; we cannot seize its wings, for it has none ; we cannot kick a more solid part, for it has none. Our good friend, therefore, the prophet—the earnest reformer—has a tough job of it when striving to vanquish, by sheer moral eminence, beautiful moral effulgence, the dreary drivellers who glorify themselves with the name of Agnostics, though Agnoetists would be a more suitable designation.

Yet, though they knew it not, the instinctive element seems to have inspired them in the choice of a name for their supreme cretinism. The Greek verb *Agnoco* means to be ignorant of, not to notice or to know. *Agnoema* means error. *Agnoia* means ignorance. *Agnosia* has the same meaning. *Agnomonco* means to be ungrateful, to be or to act without sense or consideration. The second part of this definition is explicit enough ; by the first we learn that Agnosticism steals ideas, but does all it can to conceal the theft. *Agnomonos* means foolishly ; *Agnomosune*, ignorance, inhumanity, unskilfulness, imprudence, perverseness. He who is *Agnomon* is not merely without judgment, unjust, but possibly without the teeth, *Gnomones*, by which the age of animals is ascertained. But the Agnostic, though destitute of the teeth of wisdom, may deem the tongue of unwisdom a compensation. To the Greek *Agnostos* the Latin *Ignotus* corresponds. Both words mean *ignorant* as well as *unknown*.

But, gentlemen, if you know nothing, why should you worry and weary us by your idiotic cackling ? Newton and other great men have, in beautiful modesty, made light of the knowledge which they have gained by the toil and the thought of long years. You, the Agnostics, obstreperously declare that you know nothing, yet talk and act as if you knew everything. If you had the faintest perception of the comical, you could not fail to see that the man who says that nothing can be known, and yet parades his own omniscience, is only fit to figure in a comedy.

Agnosticism is saved from being the most contemptible of frauds

by being the most ridiculous of farces. And it is not the less both a farce and a fraud because some men of undoubted scientific ability have given it their countenance. They have been induced to do so chiefly from the desire of tripping up Orthodoxy, instead of smiting it frankly in the face. Besides, Orthodoxy, so far as it meddles with science, is itself a species of Agnosticism : the less it is acquainted with science and scientific evidence, the more authoritatively, oracularly it speaks on scientific subjects. This also has its comic aspect. When a famous, but eternally blundering, statesman, not satisfied with ruining his country, went back to the dawn of creation to show of what impudent feats, of what silly freaks, his sophistry, sciolism, arrogance combined could be guilty, the more there was the pretence of instruction and edification the more the laughter of the beholder abounded. But the famous statesman, lacking humor and blinded by self-idolatry, was at a loss to discover what the essence of the joke was. It is an axiom of Orthodoxy that the less a man knows the more competent he is to pronounce on points of evidence and faith. Thus a great scholar like Gesenius, who devotes his whole time to the Oriental languages, and especially Hebrew, is not worth listening to when he tells us when and in what circumstances the various books of the Old Testament were written : the only man deserving heed is, the young Anglican curate who is ignorant of Hebrew, and whose chief training has been in the cricket-field !

Agnosticism could not have been accepted in science unless it had been already accepted in theology. Bruno Bauer, in his valiant book on "Christ and the Cæsars," has demonstrated that what are deemed conflicting currents are really portions of one mighty stream, and that Roman Stoicism and Apostolical Christianity had essentially the same aims. And, as if destined to be not enemies, but coöperators, Jesus and Seneca were in the strictest sense contemporaries, Seneca having been born in the second year of the first Christian century. We find that in every age there is one primordial oceanic rush. The leading characteristic of the eighteenth century was Illuminism. At the close of the century the light grew lurid and broke into maddest lightnings. Except in regard to its Illuminism, never can the eighteenth century be properly studied. All

were Illuminists : the Freemasons, the members of secret societies, the founders of sects, the Encyclopædists, the charlatans so numerous, the scoffing Deists, the rabid Atheists. John Wesley was an Illuminist no less than Cagliostro, Voltaire no less than Swedenborg, who, absurdly enough, has by Emerson and others been called a mystic, whereas, as a visionary, he was the strenuous foe of mysticism. Illuminists were the cynical Frederick of Prussia and the filthy Catherine of Russia. Its Illuminism was, in the main, generously placed at the service of humanity ; and ever should humanity be grateful for the aspirations and achievements of the greatly decried and greatly misrepresented eighteenth century. Everything was thorough and vast in the eighteenth century, its crime and its blackguardism not excepted. Fearless was falsehood, and fearless was also the hostility to falsehood.

As if exhausted by the Napoleonic wars, the nineteenth century has had no life apart from science and its colossal and manifold and miraculous applications. But the impulse to scientific development has come from the pressure of mechanical necessity, whereas the Illuminism of the eighteenth century sprang from the instinctive element. It is the absence of this instinctive element that marks the nineteenth century, which might fitly be named the century of Externalism. But it is the language of Internalism which Externalism deems it befitting to employ ; hence boundless confusion in action and in speech, and hence the stamp of mediocrity on everything.

The true, the divine community is a congregation of instinctive individualities. But these exist not ; therefore, the true, the divine community is a thing of the future, or, perchance, simply an unrealisable dream. In these days the only art which has been perfected is the art of association. Not, however, by the elevation, but by the annihilation, of the individual has the perfection been gained—the sluggish, slavish surrender of the individual to a gregarious tendency. A Socialist sect is founded and a joint stock company is formed from the same motives and in the same manner. One of the most lucrative occupations is that of a conspirator, and, so far from involving any danger, it is the surest and swiftest road to influence

and fame. The conspirator enters as calmly on his work as if he were taking a share in a coöperative store. A nice, genteel profession is that of a conspirator ; and, even if his schemes fail, how must the vanity of a conspirator be gratified by seeing a prime minister crawling at his feet ! If the trade of a conspirator does not suit you, try your hand as the leader of a strike. As effectually as a conspiracy, a strike effaces, slays the individual, and exalts, deifies Externalism. From the time when Robert Owen first proclaimed his doctrines, coöperation has marched with gigantic steps, but always in the direction of anarchy. In pleading zealously for coöperation and possessing himself in a high degree the genius of organisation, Owen contended no less earnestly for the doctrine of circumstances—that is to say, for fatalism in its very worst form ; forasmuch as man, so far from being the creature, is the creator of circumstances. As coöperation has gained sway, just in the same measure has fatalism extended, and from fatalism hath come anarchy, and from anarchy hath come death. Anarchies neutralise anarchies, and the neutralisation is called government.

Religion should here be the main vitalising and harmonious force ; but it was with religion itself that the anarchy began. The anarchy, however, religion strove to conceal by multiplying coöperative agencies. The more also the fables of theology were thrown to the lumber of the past, the readier theology was with new fictions and new phrases. When religion has degenerated into the tradition of a tradition, it is bewildered what to do to prolong its empire. As the forerunner of Agnosticism, the religion of the nineteenth century said that we must admit mysteries, but not regard them as intrinsically unreasonable. As, however, the mysteries of theology are traditional mysteries, they are not properly mysteries. Mystery is that only which presents itself spontaneously to the innermost soul of the individual. And every man's mysteries are incommunicable to every other man. If it is foolish to talk of traditional mysteries, it is fatuous to speak of natural law in the spiritual world. There is no law in nature ; and the slang about law in nature is on a level with certain doctrines and sayings of the mediæval schoolmen that have long been discarded. The crazes and phrases of the

mediæval schoolmen went far in the direction of bathos ; but they are preferable to the crazes and phrases of theological and scientific Agnosticism in our own day. When we listen, for example, to discourse about the survival of the fittest, we ask whether this means anything except that what has survived has survived. For, otherwise, it is exactly the unfittest things which survive ; the noblest, most beautiful things which perish.

At the close of a Panontistic homily, or Panontistic rhapsody, or whatsoever the reader may choose to call it, we leave the reader to draw his own deductions, make his own applications. What the reader might deem the protest, the proclamation of a solitary man, is really the confession of a life's experiences. It is questionable whether literature in these days, unless it takes the shape of confession, has any value. The confession of a man who from his earliest years, from his very earliest remembrances, has gone deeper and deeper into the inner infinite of his own breast, and who has nothing to offer but the treasures gathered in his interior journeys, may lead some lonely brother to make the life within the divine life for himself and a redeeming power for others. Recently Theosophy and Mysticism have found exponents ; but in the exposition it is always assumed that, if any progress is to be made in the mystical life, Jacob Boehme and many kindred writers must be diligently consulted, assiduously studied. It is our ambition to show a better way. Far less is it our desire to make war on Agnosticism than to lead earnest and devout souls to a realm remote from sects and systems—the realm of sweetest, most sacred feeling, and of richest phantasy ; the realm of ecstatic instinct, in which he whom we call God himself dwells.

WILLIAM MACCALL.